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M I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?"

A SERMON

PREACHED BY THE

EV. MORRIS JOSEPH,

AT THE

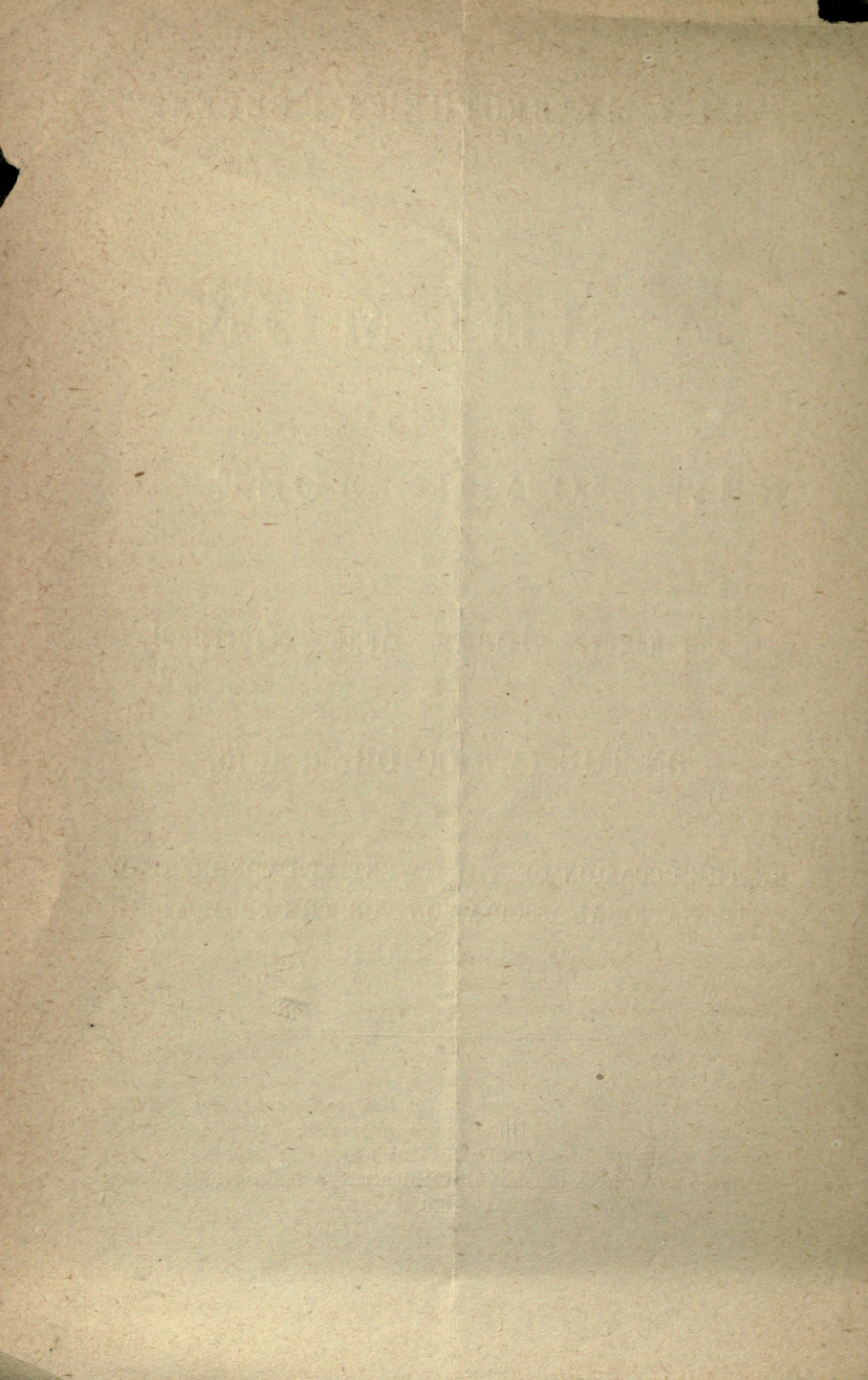
Synagogue, Princes Road, Liverpool,

ON THE 14TH OCTOBER, 1876,

ON THE OCCASION OF THE TWENTIETH CONGRESS OF
THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE PROMOTION
OF SOCIAL SCIENCE.

LIVERPOOL :

PRINTED BY EGERTON SMITH & Co., "MERCURY" OFFICE, SCHOOL LANE.
1876.



“AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?”

“And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel, thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?”—(GENESIS iv. chap., 9th verse.)

THE first of the long series of crimes which have stained the history of the human race had been committed. The jealousy and hatred of his brother which was inflaming the heart of Cain—not the last instance of bitterness and ill-will springing from the performance of religious rites—had impelled him to the perpetration of one of the most fearful offences of which human beings can be guilty—that of murder, nay, fratricide. The awful deed had just been done, and the murderer, thinking that by avoiding the sight of his victim he might escape the consequences of his act, either had hastened from the spot where lay his brother’s lifeless body or, according to the Talmudical legend,* had hidden it in some secret place.

But he was speedily undeceived. His parents had previously learned, when the voice of the Almighty reached them as they crouched in the breathless terror of guilt within their shady retreat in Paradise, that He knows every sin that is committed against Him, and will, most certainly, call the offender to account for it. And now in that awful moment, when the full sense of the enormity of his crime was stealing upon him also “in the cool of the day”—when the heat of passion had subsided and reflection had taken its place—now he was to discover, in his turn, that every crime—every sin against *man*—God’s all-seeing eye beholds in like manner, and for each one will he hold the culprit responsible. “Where art thou?” was the question addressed by the Divine voice to Adam and Eve as they were concealing themselves, as they thought, among the trees of Eden. “Where is Abel, thy brother?” the Almighty demanded of Cain, when he was cheating himself with the idea that he might rob another of God’s precious gift of life and yet be held guiltless by the Giver—that though he had sinned thus deeply against his brother who was dead, and could not avenge the wrong, he had not also sinned against the Almighty who could and would bring

* Pirke R. Eliezer.

his foul deed into judgment. The two expressions are similar in form and in import. They taught the guilty ones the great lesson of *responsibility*—of responsibility in the one case for sins against God, and in the other case for sins against man. It is with the latter instance that we have now to deal.

“Where is Abel, thy brother?” The words are addressed to all of us to-day, though they were first spoken to Cain. We are taught by the question, as he was, that we are held responsible by the Almighty for *our* brother—for *our fellow-creatures*—and that the harm that happens to them through us—not alone directly through our active interference, but also indirectly through our indifference, our apathy, our neglect—will be laid to our charge, and we must answer for it. We are answerable not alone for the suffering which, by our sins of omission or commission we inflict upon those with whom we are constantly coming in contact, but also for the widespread misery which prevails amongst the general community to which we belong if, though we know of it, we yet put not forth our hand to relieve it, in even the slightest degree. It is not enough that we care only for those who are of our own kindred or our own race—not enough that we strive to soothe the pangs and to reduce the hardships which are endured by the poor of our own people—not enough that we avoid inflicting pain either of body or of mind upon those who are dear to us. Our solicitude for suffering must have a wider range. We must say with the philosopher of old, “I consider nothing that is human foreign to my sympathies.”

There is much pain and want experienced by thousands of human beings in this country every day. We cannot see an appreciable part of the misery they endure, but we know of it, and we must help to assuage it. Help to assuage it, not alone by the easy method of giving money, but by using every power that in us lies, every opportunity that is afforded us, for the purpose of striking at the root of the evil, and thus preventing its recurrence in the future. Those powers and those opportunities necessarily vary with the individual. Some may be able to promote the good cause—the glorious cause of progress and humanity—by making their voice heard in its behalf in the Legislature of the country. Others who have been gifted with special aptitude for the work, and who have made the subject of poverty and its attendant evils their study, may use their pen; while those who have neither advantage may yet give some of their leisure time to thoughtful consideration of this grave question, and do all they can—however little that “all” may be—by speech, and by the silent, yet potent influence of their vote to bring about much needed improvement in the condition of our poorer classes.

We dare not be indifferent to such matters. We dare not confine our sympathies within the circle of our own religionists, and think that our duty lies only there and extends no further. There is enough to be done, Heaven knows, even within that limited sphere, to alleviate misery and to ameliorate the social condition of the indigent. The work is of sufficient difficulty and magnitude to engage the most anxious thought of philanthropists for generations yet to come, and to make those of this generation weary, nay, well-nigh despairing. But that is no adequate reason why our aims should not be wider, or our efforts be restricted always to the same narrow channel. It is possible for us to lend an attentive ear to the claims which the great problems presented by distress generally have upon our consideration, without neglecting the smallest particle of the duty we owe to our own poorer brethren. The two sets of obligations run parallel to each other. They do not clash. We are our "brother's keeper,"—and "brother" has a larger signification than the relationship springing from the ties of blood or religion. Every pang which is suffered by a member of the great community to which we belong, whether he be near to us or far from us, either in point of affinity or creed, is a thing that concerns us all. So long as we permit our fellow-creatures to live in a foul atmosphere or in unhealthy dwellings, knowing, as we do, that such surroundings must sooner or later accomplish their fell work and produce disease and suffering, so long do we neglect—culpably neglect—duties which devolve upon us by reason of our common humanity—duties which have been laid upon us by the "One Father whom we all of us have," by the "One God who has created us." Nay, whenever human beings succumb to an epidemic which might have been either stamped out before it became mischievous, or prevented altogether; when people die—needlessly die—through wanton neglect on the part of the living—die because the sanitary arrangements of our towns and houses are defective, or because sufficient precautions have not been taken to confine an infectious disease within the smallest possible limits—their death is indirectly laid at our door. They have died, not only through the fault of those who are in power and whose business it is to look after such matters, but through the fault of the community at large, whose business it is to look after those in power, and therefore through your fault and mine who are members of that community. We are responsible for their death, and "the voice of the blood of our brother crieth unto God from the ground."

And we cannot plead in answer to the accusing voice that our brother's well-being has nought to do with us, that we have our own affairs to attend to, that we are not our "brother's keeper." For this is the plea that Cain advanced, but in vain, when the de-

mand "Where is Abel, thy brother?" was whispered to him. "Lord of the Universe," he replied, "so the Rabbins teach, 'hast Thou not made me a husbandman? I have to cultivate my field and my vineyard. Am I my brother's keeper?'"* So, too, it is useless for us to urge in our defence that we have our own immediate work in life to do, our own bread to earn, our own welfare to care for, and that we ought not to be taxed with the additional duty of actively promoting the general weal or with responsibility when the measures taken to secure it fail. Already to a certain extent we assume that duty and admit that responsibility by cheerfully bearing those pecuniary burdens which are imposed upon us by the State with a view, among other objects, to preserve the public health and to mitigate the distress which prevails among the lower orders of the people. And our duty *begins* only with these money-payments. It does not end till we have done our best to ensure that the sums thus contributed will be applied in such a manner, and in the practical administration of such laws as will secure the high purpose for which they are designed.

Nor is it only the social and physical welfare of our "brother"—still using the word in its wider sense—that is entrusted to our keeping. Strange as it may sound, we are answerable also for his vices and his crimes—at least, for such of them as might have been prevented had our legislation and our social arrangements been different. We do not always recognise this truth, but it is a truth nevertheless. We see a being who, we are taught, has been created in the image of God, but from whose aspect and demeanour everything that is godlike or, let us say manly, has faded away, reeling out of a public-house in a condition which it would be an insult to the brute to call bestial. Whatever faint glimmerings of a soul he may possess are extinguished for the time. He is simply an embodiment of self-indulgence of the lowest kind. He drags himself back to his wretched habitation—misnamed *home*—and there, perhaps, crowns the debasing pursuits of the last few hours by a cowardly, if not a murderous, attack upon his wife. Some will shrink in horror from the scene; others will have no word strong enough to denounce such fearful vice, or no word tender enough to express their commiseration with the poor victim; only a few will bestow a pitiful thought upon the drunkard, sodden though his brains are by drink, vile though he is altogether, reflecting that his degradation is not entirely his own fault, and that he might have become a respectable member of society, certainly not a disgrace to it, if his lot in life had fallen in more pleasant places. But fewer

* Pirke R. Eliezer.

still will think a little further, and ask themselves whose fault is it, besides this man's, that he has sunk so low? whose fault besides his that he has no higher tastes than the love of drink, that there is one place—the public-house—which stands for him instead of amusement and books, almost instead of home, that from vice he is tottering into crime? But those who do so think and so ask can find but one answer to this question. Whose fault is it in great measure? *It is our own*—our own because we have done little or nothing to save that man from falling into these depths of degradation.

Had we seen that he was provided with instruction when he was young, instead of letting him grow up with a mind devoid of all worthy ideas, and without the power of gaining them in after life;—had we stepped into the home in which he was being reared, and removed him from the debasing associations surrounding him, he would in all probability have been saved. Yet we held aloof and let him drift. Or again, if when he had attained to man's estate, and as yet, vice had not gained complete mastery over him, we had given him the facilities for forming and realising a nobler ideal in life which had been denied him in his earlier days, the evil might even then have been averted, and joy and prosperity might have been there, where now there is little else but misery and ruin. Yet still we extended not our hand to deliver him, but suffered him to go on and meet his fate. Surely in the veritable words of Joseph's brethren we may mournfully confess, "We are verily guilty on account of our brother in-as-much as we saw the anguish of his soul when he besought us and we would not hear!"*

But our guilt may be still greater. The evil of the present may be the origin of evil in the future. We must not forget that suffering and sin will perpetuate their consequences unless they are eradicated. The weakness of the indweller in the close unwholesome streets of the great town is transmitted to his offspring, and so on through many generations. The crime or ignorance of the parent may become the inheritance of the child. The Rabbins of the Talmud point out† that in the Hebrew of the sentence "the voice of the blood of thy brother crieth unto me from the ground," the word "blood" is in the plural. And they account for the circumstance by saying, that while the loss of money affects only him who is robbed of it, murder deprives of life not only the victim, but also his unborn descendants. In like manner, all the prevailing evils of our social system affect the health and the life not only of the present generation, but of generations yet to come. And do not imagine this is simply a

* Genesis xlii., 21.

† Talmud Treat. Sanhedrin, fol. 37A.

social or at best a purely moral question which I am speaking upon. It is one of a still higher character—it is a *religious* question. It is a subject which Judaism has always recognised and for which it has found a prominent place in its system. Charity dispensed upon the wisest and the widest principles; Education in its most complete and comprehensive form; the preservation of the Public Health; Legislation with a view to preventing crime as well as punishing the criminal—all these great subjects occupy an important position, side by side with Theology and abstract Religion, both in the Mosaic Code and in the Talmud.

And therefore, on these grounds—on the ground that we are not altogether guiltless of the charge of permitting much suffering and vice and crime to exist which we might have striven to prevent or eradicate—on the ground that the social evils prevailing in our midst will, if unheeded, produce an increased crop of misery and degradation in the future—it becomes our duty, enforced as it is by the teachings of religion as well as of humanity, to do all that lies in our power earnestly to grapple with those evils henceforth, so that there shall be no other brother the voice of whose blood shall cry against us unto Heaven.

You will readily understand that what I have said has been suggested by the Social Science Congress which is now sitting in this town, and in which I should have been glad to see more of our fellow-townsmen, and more of our own co-religionists, taking an active interest. But the responsibility for the social and moral wellbeing of our fellow-men is not taught by such a Congress: the Congress is due to a recognition of that responsibility. The duty of using every effort to improve the worldly condition and to exalt the minds and hearts of our fellow-creatures is as old as religion and a part of religion. For there can be no higher, no more heavenly task than to scatter among the struggling, the ignorant, the care-laden masses of the people, the golden seeds of knowledge, of virtue, and of happiness. It is a work which is dictated by religion, and which bears upon its face the Divine stamp of religion. But it is a work whose results will be religious too, since every mind in which truth and exalted ideas are implanted which otherwise would never have blessed it, every heart that is made more contented, every life that is made better and purer, is another mind, another heart, another life brought nearer to God.